

WE HAVE LIGHT
John 9:1-11
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Ernest Hemingway did much of his writing very near the edge of good theology. In an intriguing short story, A Clear, Well-Lighted Place, an elderly gentleman is sitting alone in a cafe, which is - as the title suggested - clean and well-lighted. It is late at night: two waiters are on duty, one a young man who is anxious to go home to his wife and impatient for the old man to pack up and leave. The other is an older man who tries to explain why the lonely customer remains. In fact, he admits that he too likes the cafe at night time and is not anxious to leave. He says, "I am of those who need a light for the night." There is something cheerful and inviting about the bright lights of the city, or the lights of our homes, or the lights of the Broad Street Steeple. When we are deprived of light, the result is a little depressing and sometimes dangerous.

Those sentiments, which we are experiencing first-hand in the winter of 1978, have been felt by people since the beginning of time. The images of light and darkness are a universal metaphor which turn up in nearly all the religions of the world. On the one hand, evil, suffering, sin, the demonic, have been identified with darkness. On the other hand, goodness, truth, freedom, God, have been identified with the light. The first act of creation in the Genesis story is the calling into being of light: "And God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light...and God saw that the light was good."

The great Christian poet of our century, the late T.S.Eliot, wrote...

"O Light Invisible, we praise Thee!
Too bright for mortal vision
O Greater light, we praise Thee for the less;
The eastern light our spires touch at mourning..
We thank thee for the lights we have kindled,
The light of altar and sanctuary:
Small lights of those who meditate at midnight
And lights directed through the coloured panes of windows...
We see the light but see not whence it comes,
O Light Invisible, we glorify Thee!"

Light is a rich and suggestive symbol. When, on Christmas Eve, we want to celebrate the birth of Jesus in a special way, we light small candles and the darkness of this Sanctuary is slowly pushed back and we sit finally for a moment in a magic brilliance, and the truth of the occasion is expressed without saying a word. Likewise, at our Tenebrae Service, we will use the light of candles in a dark Sanctuary: this time extinguishing the light as we follow our Lord to His cross.

The Fourth Gospel employs the symbol of light to describe Jesus Christ. The familiar words of the prologue set the scene: "In the beginning was the word...In him was life and the life was the light of man. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." In the Fourth Gospel Jesus uses the metaphor to describe himself - "I am the light of the world." Our text this morning, a story about Jesus and a man born blind, is a commentary really in the assertion.

But first, let's learn a little about the background. By the year 90 A.D, it was apparent that if Christianity was going to survive it would have to learn how to speak Greek. For several decades the strength of the new movement was

located at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean. But Paul had carried it into the Greek-speaking cities of the Empire, and by 90 A.D. it was apparent that the new movement was something more than a branch of Judaism. The three Gospels existent at the time, Matthew, Mark and Luke, depend mainly on a reader's sense of Israelite history, knowledge of the law and prophets. By 90 A.D. there was a need for a Gospel for people who knew nothing of Judaism, the richness of the Old Testament stories, the traditions, the customs: people primarily comfortable with Greek thought, Greek words, Greek ideas. The Fourth Gospel was written specifically to meet that need.

It was essential to tell the story of Jesus in words and concepts familiar to the reader and for the Greeks that meant philosophy. They invented logic: they valued the disciplined intellect: Plato's "Philosopher-King" was the model of highest humanity - a monarch who knew the truth. If you ever waded through Plato's Republic in college philosophy you may remember the popular Allegory of the Cave. In that story men are chained in a cave, able to see only their own shadows on the wall in front of them. They conclude that the shadows are reality. Then one day they are released; the true light burns their eyes: they see other objects and become confused. Finally, they adjust and walk in the pure light of the sun. That, Plato taught, is the process of pursuing truth, the noblest quest known to humankind. Every Greek who could read knew that story. And every Greek believed that one of the necessities of life was to know the truth. One of their mathematicians, Archimedes, put it into a memorable sentence that remains true: "Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth."

The Fourth Gospel is an attempt to give a Christian answer to the fundamental Greek question, "What is truth?" It does not pretend to be a narrative account of the life of Jesus. In fact, it tells a significantly different story from the other three accounts. Rather, it presents a series of signs involving Jesus, the intent of which is to leave the reader astonished and asking the question, "Who is this man?", the answer to which is "He is the Light of the World - the Truth - this man Jesus."

The story about which we are concerned this morning is a familiar one. We read the first sequence of events as our New Testament lesson, but the story really must be heard in its entirety.

Jesus encountered a man who had been blind since birth. After rejecting the disciples' suggestion that the blindness was a result of someone's sin, an orthodox Jewish idea at the time, He made a paste from his own spittle and smeared it on the man's eyes. Just how Greek this story is, is indicated by the fact that the Rabbis had declared that it was illegal to use saliva in religious ceremony. In any event He sent the man to a pool to wash and when he returned he could see. The important part of the story follows next. First his neighbors express their suspicion: "Isn't this the blind beggar?" they ask. They bring the man to the Pharisees who are very interested in what happened. The man tells his story and the Pharisees object because the Sabbath law has been broken. Then the Pharisees summon his parents, trying to find out if their son really was blind. Finally, they confront the man one more time: "Speak the truth," they command - the author is still addressing the Greek mind - and the man says, "All I know is that once I was blind, and now I can see." Finally, Jesus catches up with him and the man confesses his faith. Notice that as the story proceeds, the religious authorities move further away from the truth as the blind man gets closer: in the end they are the blind ones and he is the one who can see.

Where in that is God's word for us? This is not the age of philosophy. In fact, if you want to bring to a screeching halt the conversation at a party some time, wait for a lull and then say, "I've been wondering lately, what is truth?" Our model of ultimate humanity is a very long way from Plato's "Philosopher King". We prefer scientific knowledge to wisdom, expedience to truth, pragmatism to goodness. Machiavelli said it several centuries ago and former President Nixon's cronies practiced it: "What's good is what works." And yet, even if it is an empty space, there is a place deep inside every human being where truth is defined; where beauty and goodness take shape. Deep inside, each of us has a philosophy - or at least, a place for one.

The psychologists tell us that truth is first imposed on us by parents. They tell us what is true: they communicate the operative values and standards and we accept. "This is good - that is bad: this is true - that is false." It's a very comfortable arrangement for a dozen years or so until the legendary trauma called adolescence, the essence of which is to question, rebel against, and reject all the truth so carefully imposed by parents. When you are on the parenting side of it, it sometimes feels like an assault by an alien force. We fight back: we know what is true and right and good, and we find ourselves thinking and sometimes saying, "Why do you - at the ripe old age of fourteen - think you know all the answers?" At our best and most enlightened, however, we know the absolute necessity of the process, and rejoice in it, and bite our tongues and pray for the time to pass quickly. The purpose of it all, in God's wisdom, is for the person to arrive at definitions of truth, goodness - a philosophy, if you will - that are personal and real and authentic for that individual. Sometimes the old authorities are reclaimed. You know the old story about the young man of twenty-one who wondered how his father, after years of seeming dull and obsolete, had become so suddenly wise. Sometimes parental truth is claimed: sometimes the church begins again to make some sense: and the law and the educational system.

If we have a crisis of philosophy, however, it is precisely at this point. Suddenly, there seem to be no authorities: no handles to hold. Elton Trueblood writes: "Many terms can be applied to our age, but one of the most accurate affirmations is that ours has become an age of confusion, in which people simply do not know what to think. Technology has not brought utopia, the Great Society has not emerged; peace is as elusive as ever; poverty still exists..." (A Place to Stand, p.14).

The fact remains about all of us: we need a place to stand. To the graduating students of the College of Wooster, the late Howard Lowry said, "Beyond everything else we would like to know what is true." (College Talks, p.83). When all the old authorities lose their power or integrity we look for new ones, new philosophies, new religions, Zen, Buddhism, Astrology - old ideas in new dress. Dr. Walter Menninger, two weeks ago, cited what I thought was very significant data. A recent psychiatric study indicates that the majority of young people who have become involved in the strange, fringe religions are rather healthy, stable, self-affirming. They have found a philosophy, a light in the darkness - a place to stand.

The Fourth Gospel suggests that Jesus Christ himself is the Light of the World: that in the place of a philosophic abstraction the truth is a Crucified Lord. One of the abiding ironies, however, is that the religion which gathers itself around this Lord almost inevitably assumes his mantle for itself. That was the dilemma of the Pharisees - who could not see the true light, blinded as they were

by their own religion. The more anxious we are, the more worried and afraid, the more tightly we clutch at the mantle - of Presbyterianism, or Roman Catholicism, or Methodism. Like Linus in the Charlie Brown cartoon - when the going gets tough nothing takes the place of our security blanket. Sometimes religion itself claims to be the Light of the World and plays directly into a very deep human need. We need to know the truth; our egotism needs the assurance that we are on the side of the right and those who disagree with us and threaten us are in the wrong. Dr. Eric Berne taught us how seriously we play our games of "Mine is Better than Yours": with the tragic result that Christians who ought to be standing together in the light of the world spend most of their energy trying to convince themselves that most, if not all, of the light shines in their particular closet.

The late Paul Tillich was perhaps the finest philosophic theologian of the century. Listen to his confession: "I say this to you as somebody who all his life has worked for a true expression of the truth which is the Christ. But the more one works, the more one realizes that our expressions, including everything we have learned from our teachers and from the teaching of the church in all generations, is not the truth that makes us free. The church very early forgot the word of the Gospel that He is the truth; and claimed that Her doctrines about Him were the truth." (The New Being, p.70).

In the language of philosophy, the Gospel of Jesus Christ makes a very radical assertion. Truth - Goodness - Light - is not an idea, nor a philosophic abstraction - not a creed or a theological system - but a Man. He is the Light of the World.

I would submit that the ancient dialectic of light and darkness continues to have meaning. Students of history are not ordinarily very optimistic about the prospects for the future. They tell us that most of the great civilizations have emerged, flourished, decayed from within and disappeared. They point to the tragic story of war, hatred, greed in every age and suggest that ours is no different. Malcolm Muggeridge writes: "It has become abundantly clear in the second half of the twentieth century that Western Man has decided to abolish himself. Having wearied of the struggle to be himself, he has created his own boredom out of his own affluence, his own impotence out of his own erotomania, his own vulnerability out of his own strength...until at last, having educated himself into imbecility, and polluted and drugged himself into stupefaction, he keels over, a weary, battered old brontosaurus, and becomes extinct." (Jesus, p.33).

It is not a very happy picture. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ suggests that there is light shining in the darkness of human history: that Jesus Christ and His followers keep lighting brave candles rather than cursing the darkness. It has happened in every age - hospitals, schools, equality, justice - look behind those institutions and those ideas and you will very likely discover a man or woman who knew that there is light - and that its name is Jesus Christ: that there is hope because the darkness has not overcome the light.

And more deeply still, within each one of us, there is a measure of darkness. The Freudians frighten us by suggesting that within each of us is a hidden person, a rather unsavory character at best. Our "shadow self" is what Carlisle Marney calls it: the self that wallows in guilt, that hates and hurts and resents: the self that keeps score and battles every other person for supremacy: the self that puts up a respectable front to masquerade the cynicism inside: the self that escapes on

occasion and ends up hurting people we want to love, and destroying what we want to build up. St. Paul never heard of depth psychology but he had hold of a fundamental truth about the human condition when he said, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans, 7:18-19).

It takes a very honest and courageous and strong person to admit that. Part of the truth is that there is darkness within each of us, but the larger truth, we dare to believe is the Gospel of Jesus Christ - that here, even in the labyrinth of the human soul, the light of the world will shine brightly.

The Fourth Gospel - particularly the account of the blind man, begins philosophically but concludes evangelically and personally. We must finally come to terms with this man whether our approach is philosophical or very, very simple. A Christian is one for whom Jesus Christ has become the light of the world, the living center of life, the arbiter and judge of all other truth, the very place to stand. And finally, whatever our approach, we must make some decision about this man. Whether you use the "Born Again" vocabulary of the new evangelicals, or the more staid phrases of traditional Presbyterianism, or the highest liturgical language of the mass makes absolutely no difference at all. What matters - the only thing that matters - is that you and I open our lives - even the darkest corners - and let His light shine. It doesn't matter how you do it - or how you describe it. What matters is that you choose Jesus Christ as the Light of your world. Whether the form of it is an altar call or the quiet privacy of a Presbyterian pew on Sunday morning makes no difference at all. What matters is that you claim Jesus Christ as your Lord - your Savior - your Light in whatever darkness you find yourself.

Malcolm Muggeridge, whom I quoted earlier, is an intellectual's intellectual, former editor of Punch, salty and witty Britishman of letters. Several years ago he became a Christian. I am moved by his testimony: let me share it:

"Suddenly, almost with a click like a film coming into sync, everything has meaning, everything is real: and the meaning, the reality, shine out in every shape and sound and movement, in each and every manifestation of life, so that I want to cry out with the blind man to whom Jesus restored his sight: 'One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.' How, I asked myself, could I have missed it before? How not have understood that the grey-silver light across the water, the sea-gulls and the sweep of their wings, everything on which my eyes rest and my ears hear, is telling me about God." (Ibid p. 25).

Each of us knows what darkness is. Each of us participates in the confusion and anxiety of our age. And in moments of courageous honesty - each of us has met the darkness within. For us - even today - Jesus said: "I am the Light of the World."
Amen.

Of God of light - dispel any darkness in our lives. Help us to see with clarity and accuracy - ourselves - and others - but most of all the truth incarnate in Your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen.